My Talk to an Italian LGBT Organisation on Liberalism and LGBT Rights

HELEN PLUCKROSE

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I was recently invited to speak to a liberal LGBT organisation in Turin about the relationship between LGBT rights and liberalism itself. With their permission, I an

republishing my remarks here.

(The conference was filmed and can be found here. My talk is at 2 hr 50 minutes an am translated into Italian after each paragraph).

Why LGBT Rights Need Liberalism

Liberalism has always held that LGBT rights matter. They matter because gay, lesb bisexual and trans people are individual human beings who must have the same rig freedoms, dignity and opportunities as everybody else. They matter because the abi to live openly, love freely, speak honestly and participate fully in society should not require conforming to norms of heterosexuality or gender conformity.

LGBT rights are again under threat. They have always been under threat from the forces of social and religious conservatism, which are now resurging. But they are a under threat from newer ideological movements that claim to speak for the LGBT while undermining the liberal principles that made LGBT progress possible in the place.

My argument today is that liberalism has historically been the most effective framework for securing the rights of minorities, including sexual minorities, and th it remains our best hope now. By liberalism, I am referring to the philosophical tradition that underlies liberal democracies. It values individual liberty, universal human rights, freedom of belief and speech, equality before the law, and the right o people to live as they see fit without being coerced into any moral or ideological stance.

Allegedly liberal societies have often failed to live up to these principles. But liberalism contains within itself the tools of its own correction. It allowed women, people of racial minority, religious minorities and sexual minorities to say to a cultu that took pride in those principles, "You claim to believe in individual liberty, individual dignity and universal human rights and yet you have not extended these us."

This appeals to people's sense of fairness and empathy and justice. It works.

The civil rights movement, liberal feminism, and gay rights movements advocated f groups who were denied rights, by appealing to universal principles. They argued tl black people, women and gay men and lesbians were full human beings and individuals who should not be denied rights, opportunities or dignity because of ra sex or sexuality.

Gay rights activism, at its best, did not say, "We are a separate moral caste with our own truth." It said, "We are people. Our love is love. Our relationships matter. Our private lives are not the business of the state. We should not be treated as criminals sinners, degenerates or psychiatric cases. We should be allowed to live and love and have that love recognised as legitimate."

This was a liberal argument. It was also a winning one. Unfortunately, as real progr was finally being made, there emerged a new school of thought which declared that progress itself was a myth and liberalism a false metanarrative. It must be dismantl in favour of identity politics and critical deconstructive theories about identity. Fro this emerged queer theory.

I have been a prominent critic of queer theory but this does not mean it is entirely wrong.

The way societies have understood and talked about homosexuality really has chang dramatically. For much of Christian history, homosexuality was seen as a terrible si In the nineteenth century, the idea of "the homosexual" as something someone was emerged, first in medical writing. That medicalisation was invalidating and stigmatizing. Then, over the twentieth century, this changed again. The dominant liberal attitude became something like: "Some people are gay; get over it."

Queer Theory is right to notice that the social meanings attached to sexuality have changed. It is right to notice that categories are not simply neutral; they can carry

stigma, power and expectations. It is right to question rigid norms that punish peo
for failing to conform.

But Queer Theory goes badly wrong when it treats categories like 'male', 'female', 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' as if they are merely discursive constructions produced by power. Human beings are a sexually reproducing species. Biological se real. Same-sex attraction is real. Gender roles and stereotypes are partly cultural, bu not everything about masculinity and femininity is invented by discourse.

This matters for LGBT rights. If homosexuality is treated as merely a social constru or a lifestyle category or, worse, a political identity, it becomes harder to defend san sex attracted people against the old claim that their sexuality is just a choice, a fashion, corruption or something that can be prayed away. Of course, if homosexua or gender nonconformity were a choice, it would still be a perfectly ethical one. But the overwhelming testimony of gay men and lesbians, and the gender nonconformi suggests that it isn't.

While liberal activism sought to change prejudice by appealing to shared humanity Queer Theory treats universality, normality and stable categories as suspect. It seek not merely to expand freedom within society but to destabilise the concepts of sex, gender and sexuality themselves as a form of political activism.

This can be exhilarating within an academic seminar. It is much less useful as publi persuasion. Most straight people do not appreciate being told that their sex or sexuality are oppressive social constructs. Nor is it helpful to LGBT people who wa to be accepted as a less common variation on normal to be constantly rescued from normality by activists who regard the very concept as oppressive.

This brings me to the wider problem of identity politics.

Liberalism and identity politics are often confused because both can focus on grou who have suffered injustice. But they are not the same thing.

Liberalism says: no identity should prevent an individual from accessing the full ra of rights, freedoms and opportunities available in society. Identity politics says: political life should be organised around group identity, with marginalised groups understood as possessing distinct forms of knowledge and moral authority, and privileged groups understood as bearers of domination.

The difference is profound.

Universal liberalism tries to reduce the social significance of race, sex and sexuality Not by pretending they do not exist meaningfully for people, but by insisting they should not determine your rights, your moral worth, your career, your relationships the assumptions others make about you.

Identity politics tries to intensify the social significance of identity. It tells people t understand themselves primarily as members of identity groups in conflict with oth identity groups.

This is a terrible way to encourage a species of tribal, territorial apes to think. We d not need much encouragement to divide the world into "us" and "them." Liberalism an achievement precisely because it asks us to rise above some of our baser tribal instincts and expand our circle of empathy. It asks us to judge people as individuals with whom we share a common humanity, to apply principles consistently, to empathise across difference.

Identity politics works against this. It reduces empathy between groups, makes conversation harder, and creates different moral rules for different identities. It becomes acceptable to be hostile to some people because they are seen as members a dominant group. But this is not social justice. It is collective blame. It is also an invitation to backlash.

If we undermine the principle that people should not be judged by race, sex or sexuality, we should not be surprised if others stop applying that principle too. The

taboo against racism, sexism and homophobia is historically recent and fragile. It m
be defended consistently.

That does not mean pretending racism, sexism or homophobia no longer exist. It do
not mean ignoring the needs of minorities. It means addressing injustice through
universal principles: fairness, liberty, equal treatment, freedom from discriminatior
and the dignity of the individual.

This is especially urgent right now because we are currently facing a number of
illiberal ideologies operating in the sphere of sexuality and gender that threaten to
reverse much of the progress that has been made for the LGBT.

The first is the old enemy - social conservatism - enabled to resurge again in backla
against the authoritarian 'queer' activists. This holds that masculinity and femininit
are natural, good, and should align with biological sex and work within exclusively
heterosexual relationships. Its kernel of truth is that sex differences do exist. Men a
women are not identical populations in their interests, temperaments or behaviour
tendencies, and most people are heterosexual.

But social conservatism goes further than this and turns average differences into rig
roles and regards divergence from them as a transgression. It becomes illiberal whe
treats deviations from traditional masculinity and femininity, including homosexua
and gender nonconformity, as morally wrong or even contaminating and socially
dangerous.

This remains a major threat to the LGBT.

The second ideology comes from the gender-critical faction. At its best, it rightly
insists that biological sex is real and sometimes materially important for reasons of
safety and fairness.

But the gender-critical stance also has its dangers. In radically feminist forms, it tre
men as a political class opposed to women and has a dour view of men and male

sexuality. This can manifest as homophobia and representation of trans women as fetishistic sexual predators.

In right-wing populist form, the gender-critical label has been adopted by those wh are not critical of gender roles at all but actively wish to restore them. This matters because a movement that began partly as a defence of women's rights and freedom speech can be pulled into reactionary politics that is hostile to homosexuality, gend nonconformity and liberalism.

The third ideology is genderqueer or queer activism. Its kernel of truth is that many people do not fit neatly into conventional masculinity or femininity, and they shoul not be forced to. A liberal society should make room for the feminine man, the masculine woman, the androgynous person, the trans adult, the flamboyant, the qui the sexually unconventional, the celibate, the monogamous, the experimental and th ordinary.

But contemporary gender identity activism has often hardened into something authoritarian. It claims that all must affirm gender identity to be more authoritative than biological sex. It reframes same-sex attraction as attraction to gender identity. treats disagreement as literal violence. It has encouraged no-platforming, censorshi institutional coercion and abuse of dissenters.

This is not liberal. It is also not good for the LGBT.

Gay men and lesbians should not be pressured to redescribe their sexual orientation attraction to gender identity. Women should not be told that concerns about safety, privacy or fairness are bigotry. Children and adolescents should not be rushed into life-altering medical pathways without sufficient exploration of their sexuality. We should be concerned that the UK Tavistock clinic joked "Soon there will be no gay people left." And nobody should be compelled to say what they do not believe.

So where does this leave us?

It leaves us in need of liberalism again.

Liberalism does not require us all to agree about gender. A socially conservative person may live by traditional gender roles. A gender-critical feminist may reject gender roles. A genderqueer person may play with them. A transsexual adult may se medical transition.

A liberal society can contain all these people.

What it cannot contain, at least not peacefully, is the demand that one faction's metaphysics be imposed on everyone else.

LGBT rights cannot be protected by abandoning liberalism. They were won by appealing to it. They were won by saying that people should not be criminalised, pathologised, excluded or humiliated for being who they are or loving whom they lo They were won by insisting that the individual matters more than the category, that private life belongs to the person, and that a decent society protects freedom of conscience, speech and association.

That remains the path forward.

We should resist the old social conservatism that would force gay people back into hiding and gender nonconforming people back into rigid roles that make them miserable. We should resist feminist blank-slatism that denies psychological sex differences and demonises men and trans women. We should resist the new queer authoritarianism that would force everyone to affirm contested beliefs. We should resist identity politics when it divides people into hostile moral tribes.

And we should defend a liberalism strong enough to protect minorities, humble enough to allow disagreement, and principled enough to apply its freedoms to everyone.

Because LGBT rights do not require a society in which everyone thinks the same w about sex, gender and sexuality. They require a society in which people are free to li differently.

That is what liberalism offers.

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Liked by Helen Pluckrose

Helen, thanks again for the wonderfully clear distinctions offered between the principles of true Liberalism and the various distortions of them that drive the collapse back down into all the vari tribalisms that seem to be humanity's natural center of gravity.

Liberalism, in that sense anyway, isn't trying to establish some flimsy, non-existent "middle grour between competing claims, but instead aims to create a higher ground above and beyond all tho based on identitarian particulars.

Your articles and thought pieces always do such a wonderful job of this, thank you! <3

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5 replies by Helen Pluckrose and others

Paolo Biscotto Paolo's Substack 4d

Liked by Helen Pluckrose

You make many excellent points here, and the most meaningful one to me is: we need to be sure undermine the ideas and ideals that have made things like women's rights, lgbt inclusion, etc. po in the first place. It is not obvious as it seems it should be.

I hope the Torinese understood how fortunate they were to hear you in person.

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